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TIMORESE WOMEN AND THEIR CHANGING ROLE IN OUR SOCIETY

- a brief perspective. FATIMA GUSMAO October 1990

The role of women in third world countries suggests the stereotype of women living in an environment of exploitation, lack of participation in the political life of her country, excessive emphasis in her role as mother, as cook, and as a mirror of her as "a home free from sins". The list goes on and on. In short, once you take all the moral cosmetics placed upon her over the centuries, society has simply moulded her to become a "furniture" of her husband.

Change is taking place today not only in the so-called Third World but also in industrialised countries. Groups such as "Women Against Discrimination", "Committee for Equal Rights", "Women's Liberation Organisation", and so on, are just some examples of organised lobbying in various ways to increase the extent of women participating in the decision making processes of their country's political life.

However, significant changes only occur in an environment where revolution of some sort is gaining momentum. When this is happening, women must take advantage of it and show to her society that when the chips are down, women are there to lift the whole game. That is what has been happening in my country since 1974.

After the Portugese revolution of 25th April 1974, in East Timor for the first time, after 400 years of colonialism, we found some breeding space for political activities. FRETILIN, with its revolutionary platform, started to organise the people, so that we can start to believe in ourselves as people, and to be awake to the challenges of INDEPENDENCE.

For us Timorese women, the revolution gained momentum on the 7th December 1975. Then, at 4.30 a.m., on a more than usually beautiful calm morning, when one can only expect the confident, well-tuned singing of the fighting cock, giving us the assurance that the day is going to be fine.... instead, we were awakened by gunblasts and paratroopers dropping from the sky.... and a new dawn had arrived.

We were awake not to smile, to dress our kids, and to cook breakfast. No. We were to wake to killings, rapes, lootings, disappearances and imprisonments. Could this be true? we asked, and in the immense emptiness of answers, we ran, we fought, and we cried.

But the crying could not last long because the killings, rapes, tortures, imprisonments disappearances and deprivations did not stop, even until today. As I talk to you, it is going on in East Timor, right now!

The crying could not last long because it did not bring us peace, or rice, milk, guns and bullets to help us regain our beloved country, to create peace, to create the new dawn of independence for which we long.

That fateful morning shook the traditional role of the Timorese women in our country. All have lost husbands, children, parents, brothers and sisters. Over 30% of our population has been killed by the Indonesian invasion.

Many of us took to the mountains to fight, to live and to die. I myself lost 3 children at that time. We became warriors for our freedom in our own land. The imperative for us, the Timorese women, is that the war will never stop unless we participate.

It is perhaps unfair to single out just some from the many thousands of heroic Timorese women who have been suffering and fighting this barbaric invasion. But some who have given their lives to fertilise our struggle must be mentioned today.

Rosa Bonaparte was secretary in 1975 of the Timorese Women's Organisation. She was captured by the Indonesian invading troops, raped, and coldbloodedly executed on the wharf in our capital Dili. Many others were executed also, including the wife of our late and revered president Nicolau Lobato.

Maria Gorete was only 14 years old but already very active in Dili in the clandestine network feeding vital information to the FRETILIN leadership in the mountains. She was jailed raped and tortured, and because she refused to supply the enemy with the names of other leaders of the clandestine network, the Indonesian troops took her to the back of a church and executed her.

Before she was killed, she managed to send a written message to members of her network, urging them "not to stop fighting for the total liberation of our country because for that I will happily die."

That is why I am here today, to keep fighting for the total liberation of my country, so that those who died did not die in vain. For those who are still fighting in the mountains and in all the occupied areas, I can assure them that their sacrifices will not be in vain, because out country WILL be totally liberated.

This assurance can only be given due to the active participation of women in all fronts of the struggle. On the Armed Front women are mothers, nurses, farmers, guerilla fighters and commanders. The already famous commander Maria leads a company which is most feared by the enemy in the centre-north region of East Timor. Commander Jacinta of company B. second unit, is another feared by the enemy in the eastern region.

In the Clandestine Front there are thousands of women taking active roles but of course I cannot mention names. But the case of Domingas da Costa has been taken up by Amnesty International, that splendid organisation. Like Maria Gorete, Domingas was imprisoned almost a decade ago with her baby in the famous prison Cipinang. After exhaustive appeals by Amnesty, she was transferred to Comarca prison in Dili.

Hundreds of women live in the occupied zones while their husbands fight in the mountains. Their circumstances can be very bad. For example, the recent 100th issue of TAPOL from London gives insight to that situation for Emilia, wife of our leader Xanana Gusmao.

In student organisations many Timorese women are now taking increasingly active roles at all levels. Our young people, the hope of the Indonesian occupation, instead are increasingly militant to echo the will of Maria Gorete - to fight for the total liberation of our country.

Dear friends and comrades

This is a process. The momentum is there. We as Timorese women are responding to the challenge. However as with all revolutionary process we need to be vigilant and objective to safeguard every small achievment. Our role in society has changed dramatically. Irreversibly! Yet it cannot reach its full potential without international support. This, as you show, can only be generated through organisation. leadership and hard work.

On the other hand, the world needs more women in leadership roles in every country. It is unlikely that wars would be as popular if women had equal control of governments. We know that all wars cause terrible suffering. We hope that the male presidents of Iraq and the USA take this into account.

We are very impressed with the activity of the Japanese East Timor Coalition. In 5 years it has grown from a concerned few to a powerful solidarity movement. After so many years without much of this kind of support in the region, except from some of our tireless Australian friends, I find no words strong enough to express the importance of your solidarity to East Timorese outside and inside East Timor.

I know this meeting and tour will be a positive step forward towards the day when we can meet again, next time in my home, a free, liberated, progressive, and peaceful East Timor.

Thankyou...Arigato